Discussing Language Online:
Twitter, Blogs, and Rhetorical Grammar

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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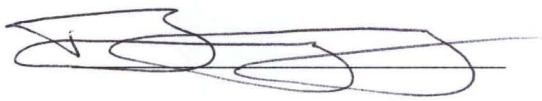

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Abstract

Today, anyone with basic reading and writing skills can communicate online. With this development, the internet has become both the subject of and an arena for heated debate concerning the use of language, especially writing enabled by digital technologies. While many researchers look at issues surrounding the internet and literacy in terms of pedagogy, this study demonstrates that views of grammar are interesting not only in a teaching-learning setting, but even more so in the context of communication in an immersive online environment. It concludes that all people, and internet users in particular, would benefit from a rhetorical understanding of grammar, which emphasizes audience, purpose, and clarity for effective communication.

This study, based on research on rhetorical grammar, multiple literacies, and digital technologies, aims to describe internet users' contributions to the dialogue about grammar, as demonstrated by user-generated content on Twitter and selected blogs. Findings show that some social media users are indeed interested in using the internet as a platform to advocate specific approaches and attitudes towards language issues such as standard grammar and forms, teaching writing, and clear communication. Data from Twitter was analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach, with categories inductively derived from emergent coding, to determine users' purposes in creating grammar-related content. The most common reason for sending grammar-related messages on Twitter was found to be sharing grammar resources, followed by the correction of others' grammar, discussion of grammar topics, and statement of a grammar rule. Correcting one's own grammar and asking for grammar help were notably infrequent in this set of data. Blogs about grammar were found to be more likely than Twitter users to present ideas about rhetorical grammar.

Acknowledgements

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Thanks also go out to all the bloggers and Twitter users whose grammar-related writing made this study possible; the authors and researchers in my bibliography; and my family and friends, for putting up with me.

And of course, a big thank you for all my professors at Ball State University and the Honors College, who brought me to this point. It's been a privilege.

Discussing Language Online: Twitter, Blogs, and Rhetorical Grammar

Introduction

What is so difficult about punctuation and spelling? Why can't young people today use proper grammar? Doesn't anyone have respect for the great English language anymore?

Anyone who has asked or attempted to answer these questions has probably concluded that there is something wrong with the school system, pop culture, or technology. Too often, the internet is blamed for ruining the language. True, a casual glance at any personal, or even professional, website could reveal a handful of errors. True, many internet users do not seem very careful with their writing. True, websites often allow content to be added by any user without a screening process. However, the tool itself should not be blamed for the user's actions. Many internet users contribute written content demonstrating an acceptable or excellent level of language proficiency, and not necessarily because these people are naturally better at English or writing.

The difference between internet users who do and do not conform to language standards when writing online is more likely a discrepancy not in actual ability but in rhetorical awareness. One kind of writing problem includes typos, extra or omitted words, and misspellings. Even the most knowledgeable writer can make this kind of mistake, due to haste or the lack of revision. As a tool, the internet may increase the frequency of simple errors because of the extreme ease of publishing content online. Another kind of writing problem includes non-standard language stemming from the writer's ignorance of audience, register, and what constitutes effective communication for a given online writing situation. In this case, a rhetorical view of grammar would help writers—whether they are students, professionals, or hobbyists—to produce

appropriate, meaningful content by providing them with the intellectual tools necessary for making good writing choices.

The prevalence of social media tools shows that many internet users are highly invested in expression and construction of identity, which includes the use of language. This study provides evidence that internet users give considerable attention to the forms of their own and others' written communication. They speculate on future developments of English, correct each other's grammar, trade teaching resources, complain about language rules, ask questions, give advice, and in all of this, use language to share ideas. By looking at the ways that internet users use social media platforms to discuss and disseminate ideas about language, we can begin to characterize the relationships between people, language, and the internet.

To address the issues appearing in a study about language use perceptions in digital social media, an understanding of the different underlying elements of such communication—literacy, digital technology, grammar instruction, and rhetorical grammar—was needed. This paper will start out with a review of research on these relevant topics. Then the research methods will be outlined, with explanations given for adequate understanding of the digital tools to be studied, followed by a summary of the data collected and an analysis of its content. Lastly, the implications of this research will be discussed.

Review of Background Literature

Secondary research, to gain background perspectives for this study, fell into four broad categories: literacy, digital technology, teaching/learning grammar, and rhetorical grammar.

Fundamental to a discussion of writing and language ability is the concept of literacy itself. First, it is the functional ability to read and write (Bizzell 133, Crafton 325), which most

people in developed countries possess from a young age. Today, though, the term *literacy*—much like *IQ*—is commonly used to refer to any and all areas of knowledge, including academic topics, personal wellness, auto repair, and digital technologies. Hawisher, Selfe, and Selber are just a few of the researchers interested in the new, growing importance of digital communications literacy, and the implications of digital illiteracy in our society. Although most people in Western cultures are reading-writing literate, there is a persistent gap between the technologically literate and illiterate, reportedly caused by race, class, and gender, as well as social, educational, cultural, and economic factors (Hawisher 644).

Inextricably linked to composition teaching—and most education now, for that matter—are digital technologies, in particular computers and the internet. Indeed, as mentioned above, familiarity with computers is considered an important literacy in which students must be instructed (Hawisher, Selber, Selfe, McLuhan, Crafton). As an example, Selfe cites a Michigan public schools mission statement that "described a 'literate individual' as one who 'communicates skillfully and effectively through printed, visual, auditory, and technological media in the home, school, community, and workplace'" (79). In many cases, computers are looked upon as instruments of leveling educational inequalities, despite the conclusion reached by Hawisher and others that the use of technology is, in practice, a divisive element in public education; it is expensive, and many people do not have access to computers at home.

Additionally, instructors sometimes feel that their teaching goals are not easier to meet when digital technology is added to the classroom, because of hardware or software limitations, the added time and stress of learning the technology, or the disappointment of high expectations for computers' capacity to enhance learning (Selfe, Selber, Crafton). The latter of these issues has been a problem since the early 1990s, when U.S. politicians latched on to the idea that

computers would not only give all students equal access to a broad education, but also improve the quality of learning and decrease the costs of teaching, none of which has come to pass (Selfe). Selfe writes that not only has computer education "failed to yield the significant social progress or productive changes that many people have come to hope for," but also that "computers continue to be distributed differentially along the related axes of race and socioeconomic status, and this distribution contributes to ongoing patterns of racism and to the continuation of poverty" (6). Some critics, then, are inclined to vilify computers and oppose their use in education, as explained by Selber.

Other negative views of computers are based on such things as the ideology of superiority of past tools over newly-developed technologies (Baron 25, 32); the fact that people try "to do today's job with yesterday's tools" (McLuhan 8-9); and the stance that digital technologies are an artificial and unwelcome intruder that should have nothing to do with language education. Several authors are eager to point out that computers are not the first technology to have been used for writing, and in fact, all methods of writing should be thought of as technologies (Baron, McLuhan, Bolter, Haas). Baron compares computers to the technology of making wooden pencils, which are now sufficiently old, inexpensive, recognized, and common to have become a transparent technology—that is, a specialized tool completely taken for granted, to the point that it is hardly an object of interest. Baron also highlights the similarities between the public's reaction to telephones and to computers; telephones were expected to facilitate education, but were also feared as an invasion of privacy. By examining past technological developments that have by now become transparent, Baron establishes an argument—which, since his writing in 1999, has already begun to be validated—that the computer and internet will eventually become transparent technologies, which people will use without awareness of the mechanism. Clay

Shirky, too, writes about the power of transparent technologies to generate change in society, examining the internet's group-forming potential in particular. It is this transparency, along with decontextualization, that concerns many researchers, who fear that students immerse themselves in digital technologies without understanding the context and implications of their human-computer interactions (Selber, Hawisher, Bolter, Haas, Crafton).

In spite of the multimedia options presented by the internet, most communication online requires at least some degree of reading-writing literacy. As subsets of language use, grammar and compositional ability, the application of literacy to communication is a staple of many curricula and a necessary skill outside of school as well. Traditional grammar instruction relied heavily on the transmission and memorization of rules that governed word choice, syntax, punctuation, and style; these rules can still be seen in many textbooks today. According to some writers, external formal rules promote good writing (Lazere qtd. in Micciche, Neuleib) and help students, ESL learners in particular, to access internal rules of grammar (Seliger qtd. in Hartwell, Kolln).

However, this traditional view of grammar instruction is not very popular anymore, as instructors and researchers question its effectiveness in improving students' writing. Hartwell reports that rules not only fail to help basic learners, but they have also been shown experimentally to degrade learners' ability to understand grammar. Crafton sums up the futility of formal grammar instruction by saying that it is impossible to teach formulas or rules for good writing (323). Further complaints against traditional grammar instruction include the opacity of so-called beginners' textbooks, which Hartwell degrades as *COIK*: "clear only if known"; that is, the definitions and explanations given therein are understandable only to a person highly proficient in the topic. In education and in daily life, Fishman and Neuleib observe that formal

grammar rules cause a noticeable degree of error anxiety, whether the error is real or merely perceived, that lowers the confidence of writers. It has been suggested, naturally, that there may be better methods of language and composition teaching (DeBeaugrande, Micciche, Kolln). The middle ground between enforcing and scrapping formal grammar instruction is the push for a redesign of grammar education.

Critics of traditional, prescriptive grammar instruction often favor rhetorical grammar not merely as a palatable substitute, but as a necessary component of teaching language and composition. As Martha Kolln explains in *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, rhetorical grammar is a combination of grammar—what language "can and will do"—and rhetoric—"how to use language effectively given a particular purpose and audience" (1). Many other sources indicate the importance of knowing one's audience when communicating (Bizzell, Crafton, Fishman et al, Micchiche). Effective writing also demands an understanding of context (Barton, Hawisher et al, Crafton), an extension of the *who* of audience to the *where* and *why* of venue and purpose. Not limited to written words, rhetorical grammar encompasses spoken language and the relationship between words and actions to create performance (Fishman, Lunsford, Crafton, Barton). With these combined tools, users of rhetorical grammar methods will be empowered with the ability to control language and use it for various purposes (Kolln, Micciche, Barton, Hartwell), including persuasion (Micciche, Bizzell), understanding and expressing relationships between ideas (Micciche, Shaughnessy, Bizzell), and carrying out good communication in general (Crafton).

In the study that follows, I will be looking at the use of digital social media to discuss grammar and language issues, promote literacy education, and advance views on society's

interaction with grammar and language. Throughout most of my education, I have been known as a stickler for "good grammar," which gives me a fair understanding of and sympathy with prescriptivism, the philosophy that rules maintain order and underlie excellence. Now, though, having discovered the study of descriptive and rhetorical grammar, I am more inclined to agree with Kolln, Hawisher, and Selfe. I would like people to have a relationship with language that allows their communication to be effective: precise, expressive, insightful, whatever the situation demands. Admittedly, I am biased toward considering the internet a useful tool rather than a harmful instrument, and in fact, the inspiration for this study was a desire to find evidence that the internet is not necessarily harmful to language proficiency. This was *not* a hypothesis about what I would find, but rather a jumping-off point for the study. Instead of evaluating internet users' apparent writing skills, I will present observations about different attitudes towards grammar and language issues. My two main subjects of research are Twitter and blogs, and specifically how these platforms are used to share ideas about grammar. These online outlets are easy to access and frequently updated, which makes them particularly relevant for study.

Methods

About Blogs

Blogs are popular media outlets that allow users to express their thoughts online. The word "blog" is short for "web log," a name that describes blogs basically as a form of journal that is kept on the internet. Blog content can be public or private, and can include creative writing, personal narrative, political commentary, philosophy, consumer reports, DIY tutorials, humor, visual or musical arts, advice, or a combination of any topics of interest to the writer. Content is not limited in length, and although some "bloggers"—users who write blogs—focus

on a specific topic or format, there is no prescribed appearance of a blog (e.g. fig. 1). That is, a blog may contain text and any graphics, sound, and video that is supported by the host site, and it is the blogger's choice whether to create content that is mostly written, mostly multimedia, or some combination. Blogs may also allow other readers to post messages, appropriately known as "comments," responding to blog entries. There are many blog hosting services that allow users to create and update a blog free of charge. Although some users are paid to "blog"—the verb for producing blog entries—about news or products, the majority of blogging is done simply as a hobby or pastime.

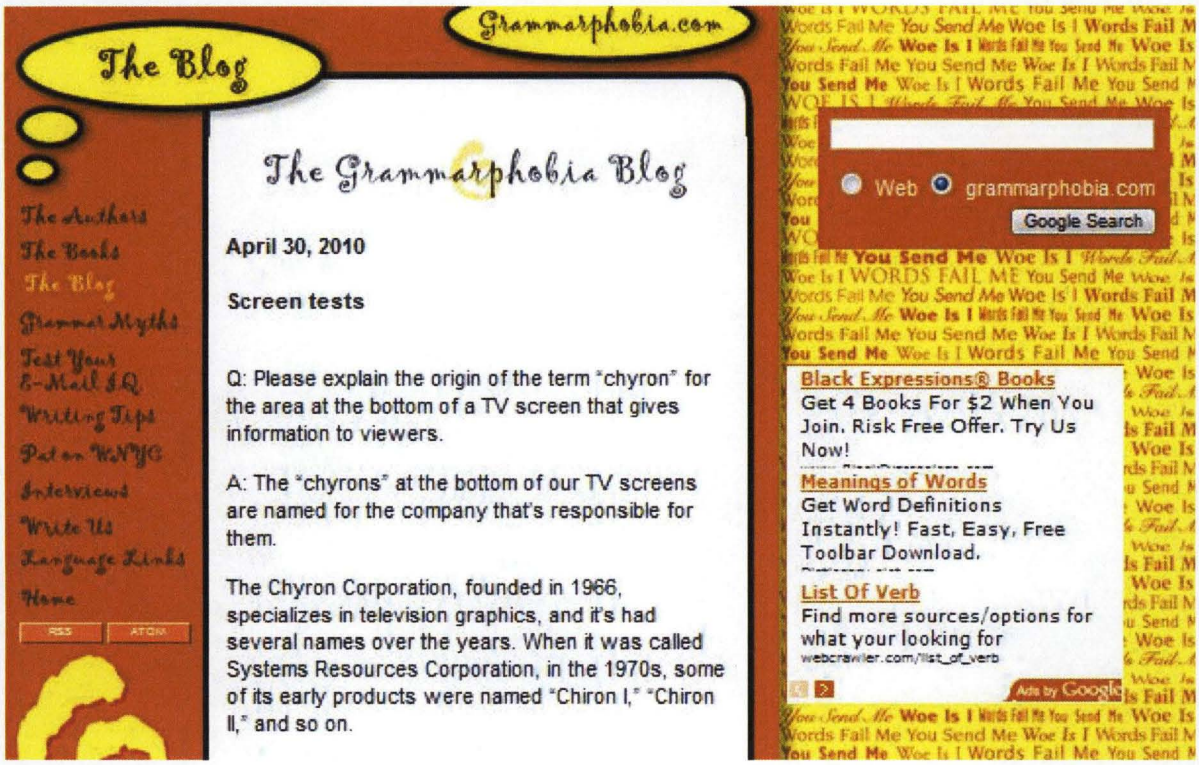


Figure 1 Grammarphobia blog (O'Conner)

Often, the most recent entry of a blog is displayed at the top of the webpage, followed by earlier entries in reverse chronological order. This format is helpful to a blog's regular readers, who do not need to start reading from the first entry again, and who are most interested in seeing the latest additions. Some bloggers encourage their readers to "subscribe" to their blog, in order

to receive email or RSS notification of new entries. Blogs may have large followings, or just a few readers. Comparative readership of blogs may be inferred by visitor counters, number of subscribers, and/or number of comments left on entries. Some examples of blog hosting sites are Blogger, WordPress, and LiveJournal.

About Twitter

Twitter is a popular online social media outlet, often referred to as "social microblogging." After signing up for the free service, users may post short typed messages—"tweets"—online, as many and as often as desired. Each tweet must consist of 140 characters or fewer. As explained on Twitter's About page, "The 140 character limit originated so tweets could be sent as mobile text messages which have a limit of 160 characters" (Twitter). Tweets may contain hyperlinks, but no media other than text, e.g. graphics. These features differentiate Twitter from blog hosting sites, which often emphasize longer posts, sometimes accompanied by graphics or other multimedia content.

Twitter users have the option to customize their home page with a profile picture, background images, and a brief personal description. Outside of this, user profiles are relatively simple, consisting of just one page: a "wall" of tweets written by the user (e.g. fig. 2). By default, tweets are public messages; they can be accessed and read by anyone, even by internet users who do not have a Twitter account. Profile pages also list statistics about users, including the number of tweets they have written, the number of users who "follow" them, and the number of users they "follow." To follow a user on Twitter means to opt to receive notification whenever that user posts a new tweet. Following is similar to subscribing to a blog, except that Twitter notifications are immediate, unlike some blog subscriptions which arrive daily or weekly. This

immediacy, combined with the fact that users can send tweets from their cell phones, means that Twitter can be used to easily share new, relevant information to a broad public network of users.

Figure 2 Daily Writing Tips' Twitter profile (Twitter)

Following should not be likened to "friending" on Facebook, because Facebook friendships involve a mutual sharing of information, while Twitter users can choose not to follow those who follow them. Because of these asymmetric relationships, Twitter can facilitate a wider dissemination of information that is intended to be made public, and at the same time, users can filter their information intake by following only those users whose generated content is meaningful to them. In this way, the microblogging of Twitter facilitates the same kinds of reader-writer relationships as blogs. Another feature of Twitter that promotes sharing is the ease of "re-tweeting," which is the act of posting another user's tweet, with message intact and still attributed to the original author. The effect of re-tweeting is that the message is sent to the re-tweeter's followers, who are often a different, though perhaps overlapping, group of users than the original audience.

To direct a message to a specific user, a tweet should include the at sign [@] followed by the recipient's username. Tweeting "at" someone can get their attention and make a message more personal. It can also be used to send tweets to a user who does not follow the sender. Twitter users also have the option to mark their tweets with "hashtags," which consist of a descriptive word or phrase preceded by the pound symbol [#]. For example, here is a sample tweet from a real Twitter user on February 1:

> "Everything you ever wanted to know about #grammar, #writing and #literacy #homeschool http://bit.ly/cixpFo" (Feb. 1).

The hashtags allow users interested in any of the hashtagged topics to find this tweet with a search tool. Not all tweets on a given topic will necessarily be marked with a hashtag, simply because it is an optional feature.

About RSS and Social Bookmarking

Internet users who consume information from several or many different media outlets are sometimes interested in RSS feeds (Really Simple Syndication). An RSS feed is an online tool that automatically collects newly updated material from user-selected sources, such as favorite blogs and news sites, and displays them all on one site, a "feed reader," in a uniform format. With the most recent content from various contributors, it is sort of like a customizable online newspaper or magazine, for which updates can arrive continuously.

Google Reader is one example of a feed reader (see fig. 3). Users of Google Reader may choose to mark individual items with one or more descriptive "tags" to allow all items with the same tag to be viewed as a group. "Stars" can also be added to items to mark them as noteworthy and make them easier to find again later. These marking options are private, affecting the

organization of only the individual's feed reader. Google Reader allows items to be shared easily, but the default setting is that each user's profile and subscriptions are private. Overall, it is a social media tool with a relatively high degree of privacy control.

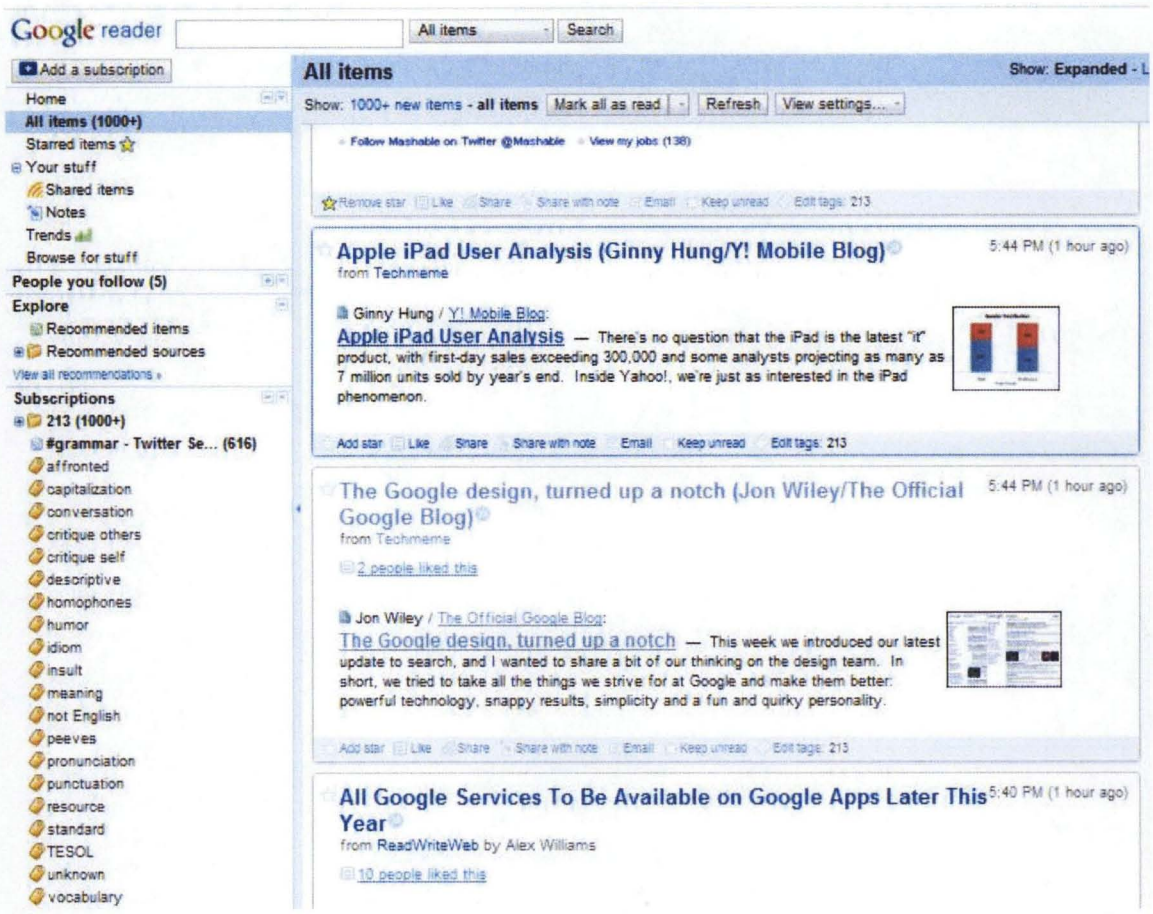


Figure 3 Author's Google Reader RSS feed reader (Google Reader)

Social bookmarking is another type of online tool that can help internet users find content that interests them. Like browser-based bookmarks on a personal computer, social bookmarks keep track of user-designated "favorites," making them easier to access again later. The difference is that browser-based bookmarks are stored privately on an individual computer, meaning they are useable only through that computer and visible only to that user, whereas social bookmarks are stored online, making them useable from any internet-access point and visible to all of the tool's users. Additionally, social bookmarking allows for more complex sorting

methods; while browser-based bookmarks are filed in a folder system, social bookmarks can be marked with multiple user-determined tags and labeled with a longer text description. Social bookmark users are drawn by the new possibilities of this tool: versatility, user-generated content, and of course, interconnectivity.

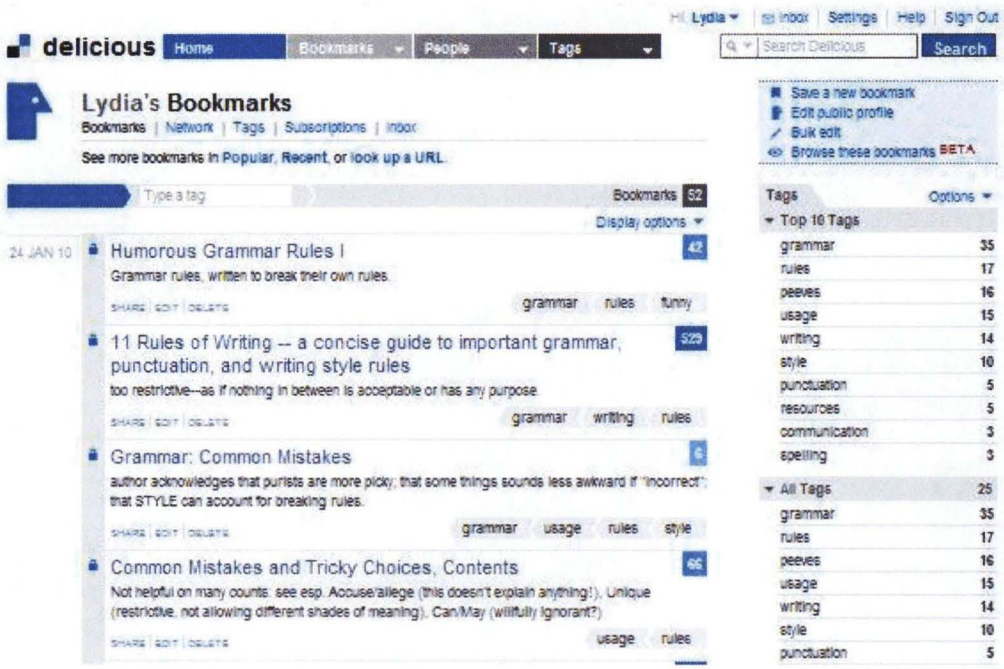


Figure 4 Author's Delicious bookmarks (Delicious)

For research purposes in this study, I used the social bookmarking application called Delicious (see fig. 4). Delicious was an interesting tool to use for this purpose, because it tracks the number of other Delicious users who have bookmarked any given website; this statistic can give a rough idea of a website's popularity. However, only a small portion of internet users bookmark sites with Delicious, so it should not be considered a definitive measure of a website's traffic or fame. Furthermore, bookmarks on Delicious may be made public or private, to suit the user's needs; it would not benefit the network for everyone to make all of their bookmarks private, but it is an option.

Studying Blogs

To learn about the use of blogs to discuss grammar and language topics, I used the Google basic search engine, Delicious bookmark application, and links that I found on Twitter. While many bloggers mention grammar issues in an entry or two, I found that there are comparatively few blogs dedicated entirely to language issues. This indicates that although the study of grammar is not the primary purpose of most blogs, many bloggers do have some interest in writing about language usage.

For each grammar blog I found, I tried to determine the stance and motivation of the blogger, in addition to the type of content provided. In particular, I wanted to know whether the blogger demonstrated a more traditional or more rhetorical approach to grammar use and instruction.

Collecting and Sorting Tweets

To study Twitter users' conversation about grammar, I used an RSS feed in Google Reader that collected all tweets that were marked with the hashtag #grammar, beginning in late January 2010. After reading each tweet, I marked it with tags that I thought best characterized the topic, intention, and/or tone of the message. Because I was not expecting anything in particular in this study, I initially created tags as I went along, marking traits that seemed to appear frequently. Soon, however, I realized that I had an unwieldy assortment of tags on my hands. The original list runs:

- affronted
- capitalization
- conversation
- critique others
- critique self
- descriptive
- homophones
- humor
- idiom

- insult
- meaning
- not English
- peeves
- pronunciation
- punctuation
- resource
- standard
- TESOL
- unknown
- vocabulary
- word processing

With twenty-one complexly-overlapping tags, I could not easily draw any conclusions other than that these categories existed.

These categories were inductively derived from emergent coding, as the process is described by Glaser and Strauss. That is, I was not looking for specific categories, but rather, the categories emerged from the data itself. Instead of trying to make tweets fit into predetermined groups, I tried to describe each data point accurately and meaningfully, to sort the data along pre-existing lines. This method, known as the modified grounded theory approach, is a systematic means of study that operates without a set hypothesis. The end goal of the process is to formulate a theory or idea, not to prove or disprove an initial hypothesis. This approach is appropriate for a study of digital social media, because not all traits of Twitter and blogs can be considered objective scientific facts; and even if an initial hypothesis could be proven or disproven at the time of the study, the facts may well change as people use media in new ways. For these reasons, drawing a hypothesis from the data itself is a better method of study in this case.

To revise my overly complex system of coding, I simplified my sorting method into seven broad categories by using a "process of constant comparison" (Glaser and Strauss):

1. correcting/criticizing one's own GRAMMAR/LANGUAGE
2. correcting/criticizing someone else's ~
3. asking for help/advice about ~
4. stating a ~ rule/guideline

5. sharing a ~ resource
6. conversing on ~ topics
7. unknown content

If a tweet showed traits of more than one category, I sorted it into the group that seemed to characterize it best. "Unknown content" included any tweet I did not understand, generally for lack of context or because it was not written in English.

I used twelve small sets of data, each set comprised of a 48-hour block of tweets, with dates ranging from January 31 to March 26, 2010. In total, 776 tweets were analyzed.

Data Collected

Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Totals
Date								
1-Feb	2	10	2	5	17	11	1	48
6-Feb	2	16	2	1	26	13	2	62
10-Feb	5	6	3	3	97	8	1	123
15-Feb	4	12	1	8	6	4	2	37
18-Feb	0	9	0	6	33	14	0	62
22-Feb	0	21	4	12	18	16	4	75
1-Mar	0	13	1	1	22	7	0	44
6-Mar	0	9	1	3	32	15	0	60
11-Mar	4	13	1	7	18	20	1	64
17-Mar	2	21	1	4	20	12	2	62
22-Mar	3	8	3	13	17	9	3	56
26-Mar	3	14	4	15	27	18	2	83
Totals	25	152	23	78	333	147	18	776

Table 1 Summary of the data collected, with the number of tweets in each small data set, divided by category; and the total number of tweets in each category and in each small data set (Twitter)

Category Legend:

1: correcting or criticizing one's own GRAMMAR/LANGUAGE

2: correcting or criticizing someone else's ~

3: asking for help or advice about ~

4: stating a ~ rule

5: sharing a ~ resource

6: conversation about ~ topics

7: unknown intent

Analysis

Results of Studying Blogs

Two of the most seemingly-popular grammar blogs are Grammar Girl, bookmarked by 2701 people on Delicious, and Daily Writing Tips, bookmarked by 1180 (Delicious).[1]

The first—full title, Grammar Girl: Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing—is a collection of advice for writers, written by "grammar guru" and author Mignon Fogarty. It is divided into the following categories: general, grammar, punctuation, word choice, and style. Much of the website's content is multimedia, with podcast audio and accompanying text transcripts. Users can also follow and interact with Fogarty's online persona, Grammar Girl, on Twitter, which is a definite advantage that a real person has over a resource that seems, however authoritative, inhuman and static (e.g. OED Online). Recent podcast titles include:

- Further Versus Farther (Apr. 22)
- What is Poetic License? (Apr. 15)
- Stacked Modifiers (Mar. 18)
- Top Ten Grammar Myths (Mar. 4)
- Is "I'm Loving It" Proper Grammar? (Jan. 14)
- How Do You Pronounce 2010? (Jan. 8)

The content of these podcasts demonstrates a rhetorical approach to grammar, emphasizing the need for clarity and precision in order to connect with the intended audience. Fogarty has a conversational style of blogging, presenting an image of a knowledgeable, helpful friend. Indeed, Fogarty's bio declares, "Her arch enemy is the evil Grammar Maven who inspires terror in the untrained and is neither friendly nor helpful" (Grammar Girl). She cites other language resources for authority and gives plenty of examples to demonstrate language concepts. In "What is Poetic

[1] As of 05 May 2010.

License?" she admits to holding a bias against certain nonstandard song lyrics while accepting others; however, she concludes that art is a matter of opinion, and asks her audience for feedback about the difference between errors and poetic license. By framing the search for grammar advice as a conversation rather than a lecture, Fogarty encourages internet users to become more proficient and empowered language users.

Daily Writing Tips is just what the name implies: every day, a fact about the English language is posted online. Some recent examples include:

- "Hell-bent" and "Hell-for-leather" (Mar. 3)
- "Urk" is not a standard spelling (Mar. 5)
- An Ultimatum IS "Final" (Mar. 8)
- 33 Writing Terms You Should Know (Mar. 8)
- Is "fulsome" a complimentary word? (Mar. 15)
- When to use "an" (Mar. 22)

Although they are not divided into categories like Grammar Girl's tips, the Daily Writing Tips do fall into various categories such as usage, style, definitions, and language history. Readers can easily use the icons at the top of the webpage to subscribe to the Daily Writing Tips RSS feed or become a follower on Twitter. The About page explains that the purpose of maintaining the site is to help writers: "Whether you are an attorney, manager or student, writing skills are essential to your success. The rise of the information age—with the proliferation of e-mails, blogs and social networks—makes the ability to write clear, correct English more important than ever" (Daily Writing Tips).

Grammarphobia provides informative discussions about grammar, language use, and the history of language, in short informal blog posts. Although this resource is not terribly popular

on Delicious, it is noticeable on Twitter, partially because the blogger, Patricia T. O'Conner, tweets about updates. Some recent post titles include:

- And by the way… (Mar. 17)
- Why a duct? (Mar. 18)
- An issue of ownership (Mar. 19)
- Home school, home-school, or homeschool? (Mar. 23)
- Infinitive wisdom (Mar. 31)

O'Conner uses a question-and-answer format, responding to people who ask her about language issues. Posts are generally only a few hundred words long, broken into very short paragraphs for easy casual reading. Citing recognized language resources, such as dictionaries and style guides, O'Conner bases her advice on demonstrated language patterns in modern and historical instances. Often, she concludes that the proper use or definition of a word has changed over time. This descriptive approach to language

Other supposed language authorities and resources that appeared on Twitter included tao_of_grammar, Grammaropolis, and denisehalo. Tao_of_grammar posts grammar tips on *IT Knowledge Exchange*, a website with user-generated advice content. Grammaropolis has a blog, but focuses mainly on a website with teaching resources such as songs, videos, and books meant to help children learn elementary grammar such as parts of speech and basic sentence structure. Denisehalo simply has pet peeves, and tweets grammar rules to inform the public. As shown by the examples above, the intersection of blogging and microblogging provides internet users with a variety of ways of sharing information online.

Analysis of #grammar Tweets

Fig. 5 is a visual representation of the content of the 776 tweets collected for this study.

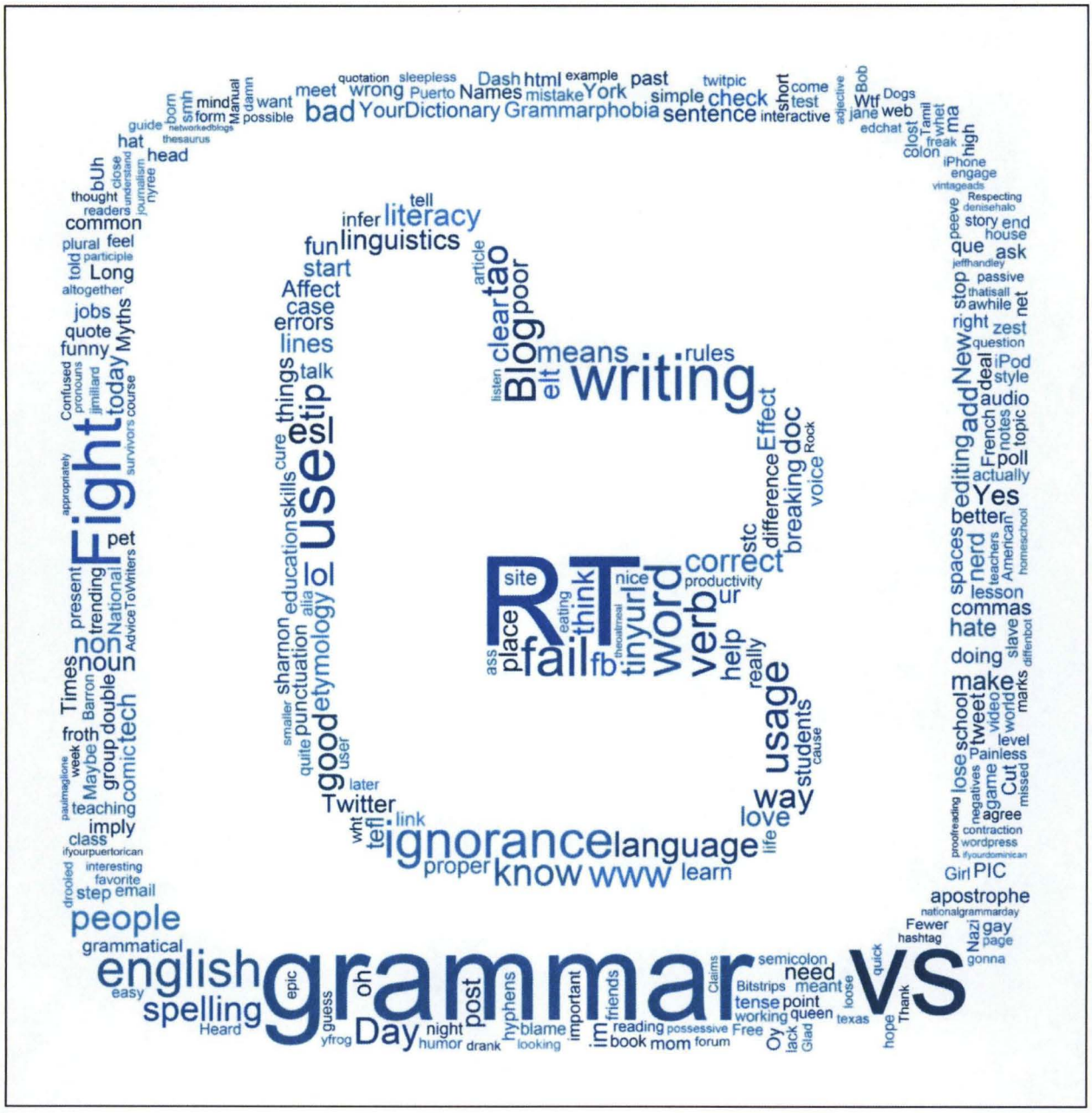


Figure 5 Word cloud of data set (Twitter, Tagxedo)

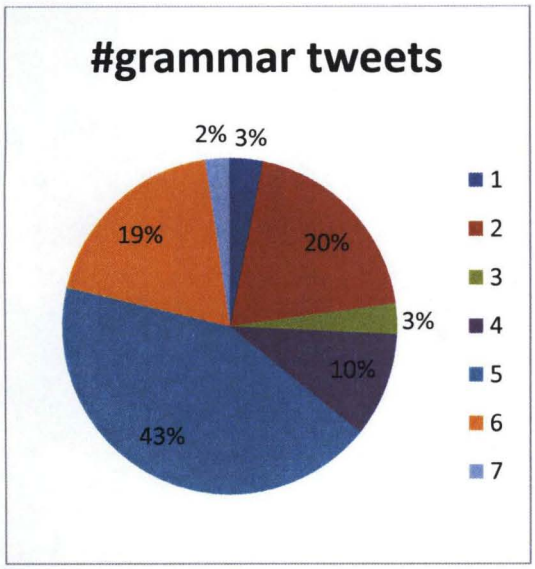
It was created with Tagxedo, a word cloud generator. This online tool analyzes text, determines the frequency ratio of each word present, and arranges the words into a collage. Large type is used for the words that appear most often in the given text, while less common words are

displayed in smaller type. For example, the large *RT* indicates the high frequency of re-tweeting within the data collected. The word cloud shown here provides a sample of the data set content, as well as an insight into the topics discussed further below: the variety of things people talk about when they use Twitter to discuss grammar.

As you can see in the pie charts below, the twelve small pies—each representing one small set of data—are each, for the most part, visibly similar to the large pie chart displaying the totals. This shows that the total percentages are not unrepresentative of the data on a smaller scale; or, to put it another way, the large pie chart is a meaningful, though basic, summary of the data.

Each category will be discussed separately, in order of size from largest to smallest. Representative examples of tweets will be given, to illustrate some common themes among messages and demonstrate the differences among categories.

Figure 6 Pie charts showing proportions of categories in total data set and small data sets (Twitter)



Category Legend:

1: correcting or criticizing one's own GRAMMAR/LANGUAGE

2: correcting or criticizing someone else's ~

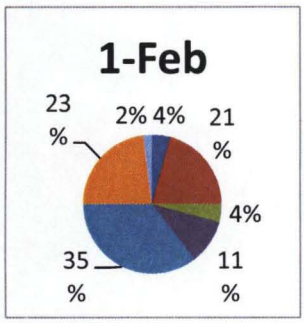
3: asking for help or advice about ~

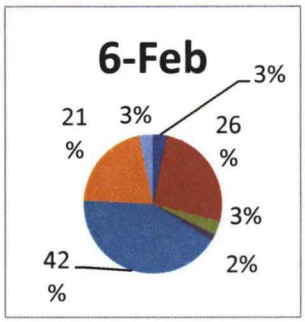
4: stating a ~ rule

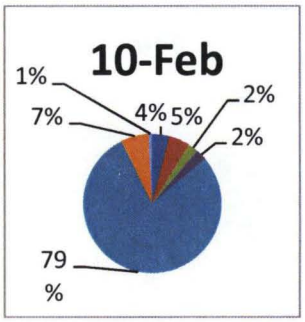
5: sharing a ~ resource

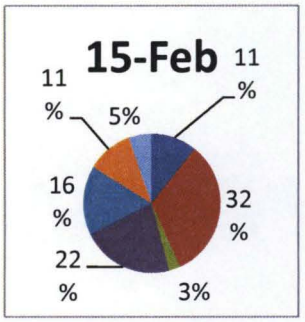
6: conversation about ~ topics

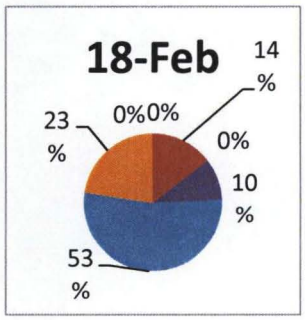
7: unknown intent

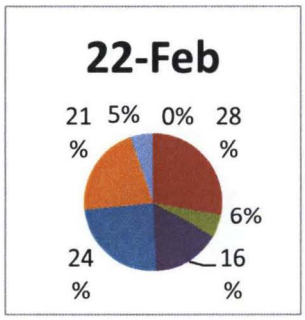


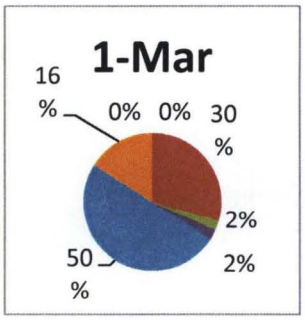


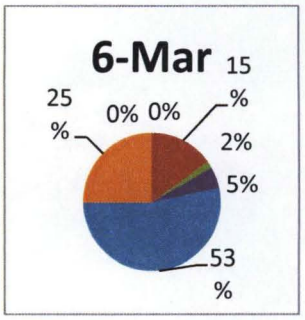


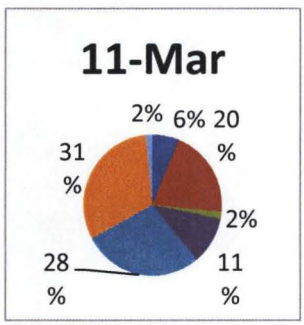


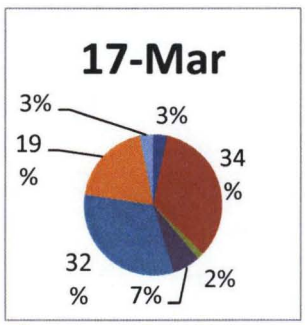


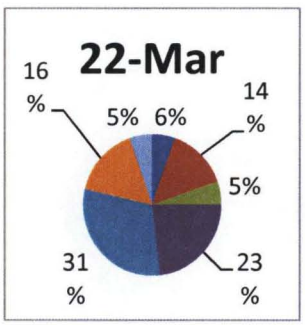


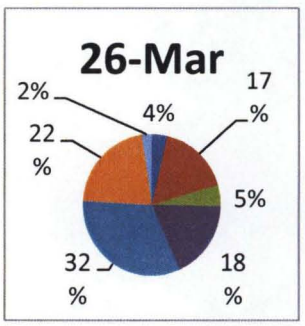






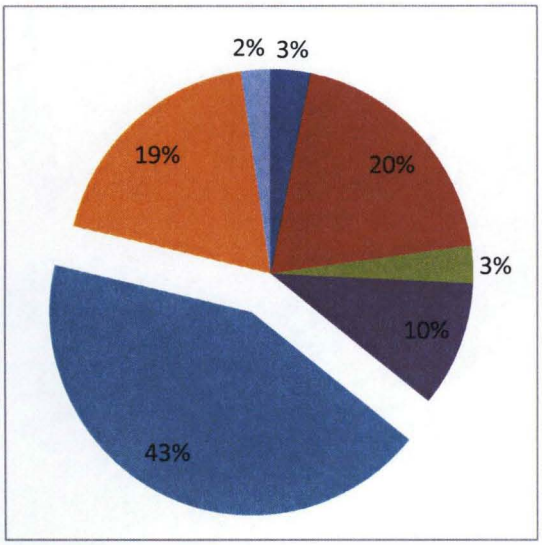






Category 5: Sharing Resources

In the total pie and in most of the small sets (see fig. 6), the largest portion of the data falls in Category 5. Sharing resources about grammar and language seems to be quite popular among #grammar tweets. Many of the Category 5 tweets were, I noticed, tweeted either directly from users who create grammar resources—such as Grammar Girl, Grammarphobia, and Tao of Grammar—or re-tweeted from other users' tweets. In a way, the practice of re-tweeting contributes to the prevalence of Category 5 among #grammar tweets, because a hashtag present in the original tweet will be repeated in subsequent re-tweets. Additionally, Category 5 lends itself to re-tweeting because a resource-sharing message is not as likely to be specifically tailored to the original writer or the original audience, as compared to a message in any of the other categories. In short, Category 5 messages are more relevant for re-tweeting.



Other tweets in this category linked to teaching/learning resources, advice on writing style, and digital tools for people interested in language. Blogs that serve as resources on language topics, such as those discussed above, appeared relatively frequently.

Finally, to comment on the most noticeable feature of the data (see fig. 7), there is one outlying data point that greatly contributes to the number of Category 5 tweets. In the February 10 set of tweets, it appears that someone launched a Twitter campaign to educate users about the differences between common English homophones, e.g., your and you're. Messages followed the same basic format:

"Fight the ignorance! Their vs There" (Feb. 10).

—or There vs They're, Affect vs Effect, You're vs Your, It's vs Its—followed by the #grammar hashtag and a hyperlink to a page explaining the difference. Later tweets dropped the article, proclaiming simply, "Fight ignorance!" Nearly all of these messages were generated by the same user, one called "diffenbot," ostensibly an automated tweeter that uses content from Diffen.com to send informative messages to followers. The sheer number of these tweets gives Category 5 impressive weight; however, even without the "fight ignorance" tweets, Category 5 tweets would still outnumber all of the other categories. Further study may show whether this kind of flood is a relatively frequent occurrence or not.

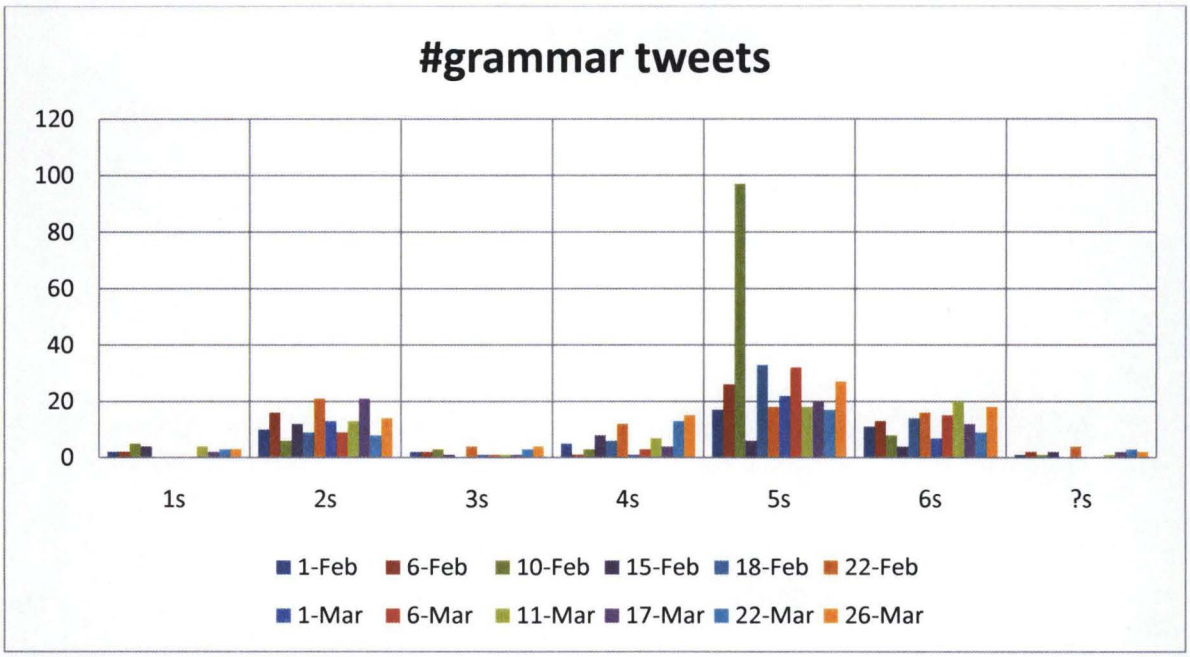
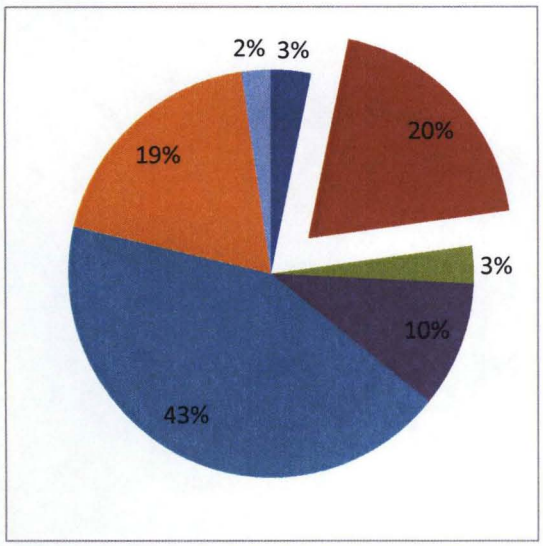


Figure 7 Bar graph of #grammar tweets, separated by small data set and clustered by type (Twitter)

Category 2: Correcting or Criticizing Others' Use of Language



The next two largest overall trends are Categories 2 and 6. I'll discuss Category 2 first, because it is a more cohesive topic. As can be expected, I found a significant number of tweets correcting or criticizing others' use of language. Often, Category 2 messages were tweeted at the offending party, as a response to a tweet containing perceived grammar or usage errors. Criticism could be mild, helpful, teasing, cutting, exasperated, or anything in between; the intended and perceived tone of each tweet could be difficult to judge because speech habits of and relationships between Twitter users were unknown. For example, one user writes,

"@Hudvetica I think you meant 'your' not 'you're'. #grammar #fail :P #nub" (Mar. 11).

This could be interpreted as a playful jab from a friend or as an unwelcome, irrelevant contribution. Inclusion of the terms "fail" and "nub" may be interpreted as highly negative or as thoughtless cliché, and the emoticon [:P] could indicate disgust or sass. Interestingly, a handful of Category 2 tweets do not indicate high proficiency in the prescriptive standard grammar that they advocate; for example:

"Its doing 'well' not doing 'good' your in college. #grammar #fail" (Feb. 18).

This next tweet, on the other hand, may actually have helped its recipient:

"@13wham: Wrong 'it's' in this story...http://bit.ly/cDfLxy. Might wanna fix that. #grammar #oops" (Mar. 26).

On following the hyperlink, I found a news article that demonstrated standard use of *its* and *it's*, indicating either that the advice was utilized or that no error ever existed. The intention seems to be helpful, at least, as there are no clear signs of insult.

Sometimes Twitter users pointed out language errors in celebrities, national media outlets, or general groups of people. One user pokes fun at Sarah Palin in a message that Palin herself will most likely never see:

> "Uh oh she's talking faster....conjunctions are dying.... #Palinspeech #p2 #Grammar" (Feb. 6).

Commentary of this sort is produced under the assumption that the language use of public figures is an open topic for discussion, perhaps as a reflection of their character and intelligence. Another user points out ambiguity in the Columbus Dispatch:

> "Cols Dispatch: In 2007 'there were about 2 dozen schools the state could not audit. Now there are 5.' So, is that good news or bad? #grammar" (Feb. 6).

Sometimes a tweeter would give an example to demonstrate a trend of perceived low grammar awareness; for example,

> "How did news anchors' #grammar become so bad? The #CNN reporter on air now just said, 'whomever threw that brick is a mystery'" (Mar. 25).
>
> "Oh, HGTV, why must you irritate me with your poor #grammar?" (Mar. 25).

The latter was followed by a link to an image that reads, "Keeping up with the Jones'." Both of these messages imply that readers will understand the reason for complaint.

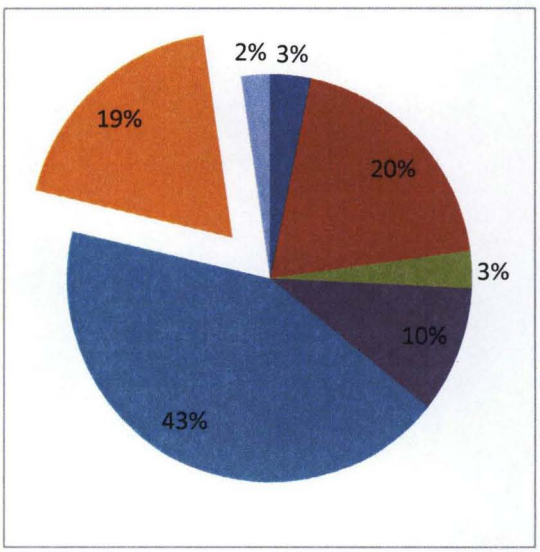
Some tweets characterize the internet in particular as a way to find—and develop—non-standard grammar. For example:

"isn't/isnt they're/their your/you're are/our to/too - so much bad #grammar on the internet" (Mar. 1).

"I've been reading blogs all day... and have found so many spelling mistakes, grammar issues, typos... #proofread people! :) #grammar" (Feb. 1).

Despite the smiley emoticon in the latter tweet, the message connects blogs with careless writing, and perhaps rightfully so; but, careless writing on the internet should not be news to anyone, so it is interesting that internet users take any energy at all to comment or complain about the situation.

Category 6: Conversation About Grammar and Language



Fed by a wide variety of different topics, Category 6 was as prominent as Category 2. Tweets included complaints about the difficulty of learning grammar rules, speculations on the future of the language, discussion about the appropriateness of acting as a "grammar nazi," opinions about the importance of language skills, criticism of school systems, praise of good grammar, humorous observations, pet peeves, and even content related to the Na'vi language (from the science fiction movie *Avatar*). Basically, if a tweet did not specifically fit into Categories 1-5, it was sorted into Category 6; the one thing that can be said about these tweets is that they all show some degree of interest in language, whether positive or negative.

With grammar skills and social media in recent news, some tweets shared articles discussing the concern that Facebook, Twitter, and other online outlets affect language skills negatively. For example:

> "Do you think you have bad #grammar? It may be due to your social networking! http://ow.ly/12PNb" (Feb. 1)

Many tweets, such as the following, prompted readers to evaluate the importance of grammar rules and the act of policing grammar.

> "#Writers & #Editors: are we being snobbish or helpful by correcting others' #grammar? http://bit.ly/dm1HNb" (Mar. 22)
>
> "RT @writing_guide: Should poor writing skills cause Detroit schools chief to lose his job? http://tinyurl.com/ylzw38o #detroit #writing #grammar" (Mar. 16)
>
> "#grammar- if you are going to correct grammarn then please know WTF u r talking about. Thks and have a nice day!" (Mar. 11)
>
> "okay, when I start brazenly correcting people's #grammar TO THEIR FACES, it is clear that I need #cardio. Stat. Get me to an elliptical!" (Feb. 23)

As is apparent, this issue is relevant to Twitter users, who likely see a lot of nonstandard grammar and need to decide how to respond. The messages above show sensitivity to both the formal and the social aspects of communication.

Grammar is also a source of humor for internet users. The next tweet demonstrates a creative, interactive approach to different aspects of written language, especially typography and tone.

> "Cranky and negative today. Going to punctuate my negative contractions with !. I can!t be stuffed. Don!t talk to me. #grammar" (Mar.16)

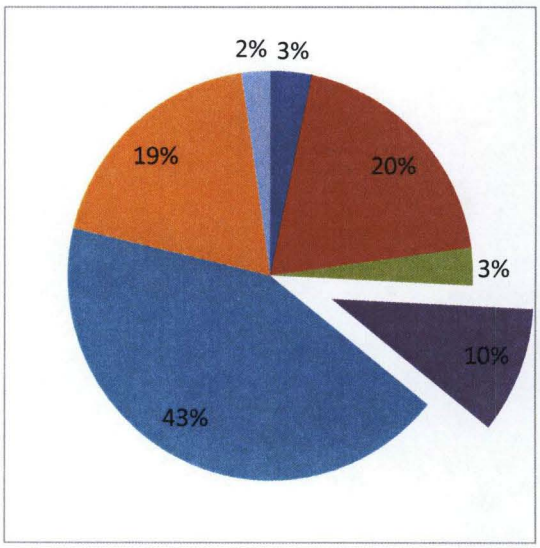
The tweet below shares a hyperlink to a website devoted to finding humor, as well as rhetorical grammar lessons, in grammatical errors involving quotation marks.

> "'Love' this site. RT @stc_te_sig: The 'blog' of 'unecessary' quotation marks http://bit.ly/ZVMS0 #writing #grammar #humor" (Mar. 25)

The examples given here represent only a few of the many grammar and language topics to be found in conversations on Twitter. The size of Category 6 indicates the multifaceted nature of language discussions, and the wide range of attitudes taken toward grammar.

Category 4: Stating a Language Rule

The next largest category, at 10% of the total, was Category 4. Content in Category 4 tweets could be very similar to that of Categories 5 or 2, and it was often difficult to distinguish among them. This type of tweet usually consisted simply of a usage or punctuation rule, often with a call to attention and/or a request to follow the rule. For example:



> "No matter how many times 'impact' is used as a verb, it will not make it correct. Impact is NOT a verb. Please obey. Thank you. #fb #grammar" (Mar. 26).

Here, *#fb* is probably an abbreviation for *Facebook*; this hashtag allows a user to post an update to Twitter and Facebook simultaneously, using an application that links the two platforms.

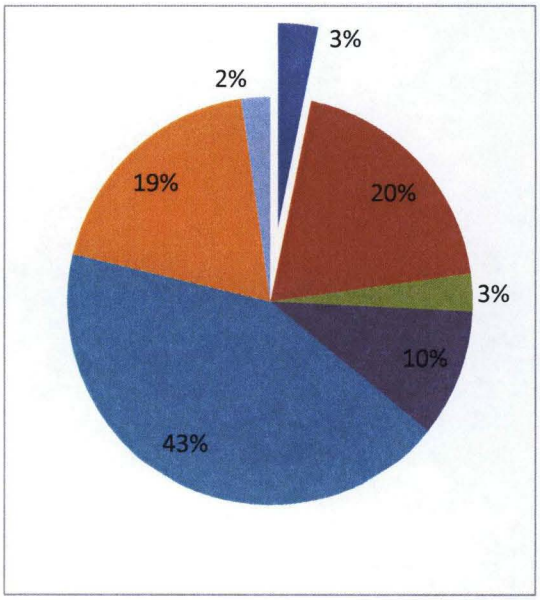
> "Less. Fewer. There is a difference. Less means a smaller AMOUNT of something. Fewer means a smaller NUMBER of people or things. #grammar" (Mar. 22).

This description, though clear to anyone who knows the less-fewer distinction, may or may not be helpful to anyone previously unaware of it.

With many Category 4 tweets, it is difficult to tell whether the writer is targeting a specific audience or simply airing pet peeves. The lack of supporting evidence for a rule, such as a hyperlink to another resource with a more complete explanation, makes these statements about grammar appear less authoritative and more like a soap box announcement. It is also common for Category 4 tweets to come across as irritated, as if the writer feels personally affronted by others' uninformed use of language.

Category 1: Correcting or Criticizing One's Own Use of Language

Category 1 tweets were not very common, with an overall appearance rate of 3% within #grammar tweets. Twitter users make corrections to their previous statements, apologize for language errors, and comment on their own overall use of language. One writes, as a follow-up to a previous tweet,



"That should have been 'saw', not 'see'. Whoops. #grammar" (Mar. 17).

This kind of message is the only option for correction available on Twitter, because once a tweet has been posted, it cannot be retracted or edited. Corrections may clarify the meaning of a tweet, or simply inform readers that the writer is aware of his or her mistake. This Twitter user tries to simultaneously head off criticism and divert blame for a grammar error:

"Okay, before the grammar police strike - I realize that my last tweet should have read 'you and I' #grammar #fail #publiceducation" (Mar. 25).

Tweets such as the following, from two different users, show that tweeters may be more aware of standard language guidelines than their written posts would suggest:

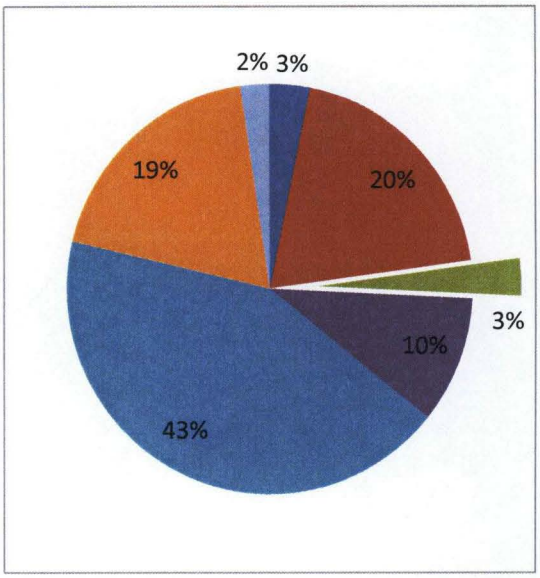
"I really should proof read my tweets before I send them. #grammar" (Mar. 25).

"Ashamed -looking back at my tweets- by my lack of respect for sequence of tenses in English. One day I will learn #grammar" (Mar. 25).

These messages serve as acknowledgements of written errors, as well as apologies to readers who may be offended.

There are several factors that may account for the difference in frequency between Categories 1 and 2. Category 2 tweets comment on language that appears on TV, in the news, in ads, on physical signs, in offline conversation, on any website, and anywhere else in the world—while Category 1 tweets can only, by default, comment on the writer's own use of language, usually on Twitter, at that. There is much more fodder for Category 2 thoughts. Additionally, the ephemeral nature of tweets may decrease the likelihood that a user, even one who is aware of a set of language guidelines, will correct a posted mistake. After all, once a message has been composed, the user probably has little reason to review it, which in itself lowers the chance that an error will be noticed. Since a major function of Twitter is quick communication, a mistake that is noticed but considered not to interfere with the message may not be corrected, either.

Category 3: Asking for Grammar Help



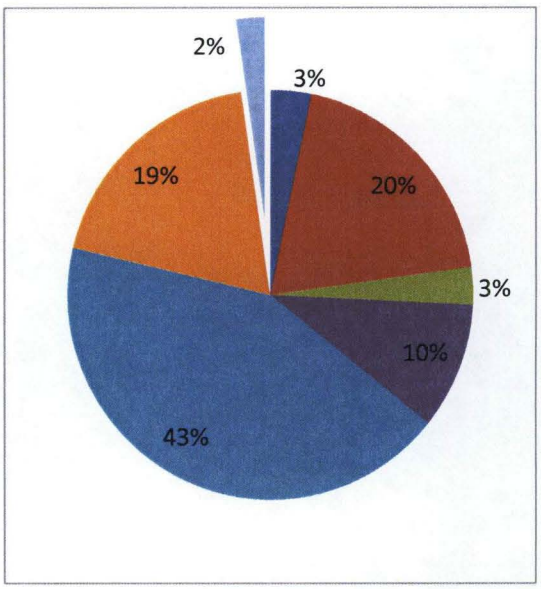
Another small category was Category 3, also 3% of the total. Tweets in this category usually presented two or more options for a sentence or phrase, and asked for other users' input on which option was correct. For example:

> "um, ur, #grammar help: feel different or differently? 2nd proper b/c feel is verb, no? but 1st sounds better, yes? thoughts, grammar geeks?" (Mar. 17).
>
> "How do you write this - My son John's hat? My son's, John, hat? #grammar" (Feb. 23).
>
> "#Grammar question: 'I don't see that Al, Billy, Charlie, nor myself were included…' Should it be 'NOR' or 'OR' in that context?" (Feb. 5).

In general, grammar questions were addressed to the public, not tweeted at any particular user. Often, the writer seemed to have an idea of the answer already, but to doubt his or her proficiency.

One reason this category may be small is that a language user who has sufficient technology literacy to use Twitter probably also has knowledge of internet tools that would assist in searching for language resources. Even a common search engine can help internet users find answers to most grammar questions. It could be that these Twitter users have had trouble finding or interpreting grammar resources, or that they find it more convenient or reliable to ask for human help. Perhaps tweets in Category 3 show a distrust of impersonal online resources, and a desire for specific, personalized advice.

Category 7: Unknown



Lastly, Category 7 is made up of tweets whose content I could not understand. Some had messages that did not seem to be related to grammar at all; some were in languages other than English; some lacked the context necessary for placement in a category. The low frequency of this category implies that when people tweet about grammar, the message is almost always straightforward enough to determine their basic intent. However, this is not to say that reasons for communication are always simple and transparent. For example, a Twitter user who posts Category 5 messages, ostensibly sharing grammar resources for anyone and everyone, may actually be targeting a certain friend, hoping that he or she will notice and change longtime nonstandard patterns; or a user may pretend to be interested in grammar issues in order to appear more intellectual; or the followers of Grammar Girl may be more like the so-called "Grammar Maven," her nemesis. In short, without knowing more about each individual Twitter user, we may as well place *all* tweets in Category 7, but for the purposes of this study, the ostensible intent of a tweet is sufficient for categorization.

Implications

After looking at the big picture, examining individual cases, and identifying themes in the grammar-related content that can be found on blogs and microblogs, several issues stand out as crucial for further discussion: the instrumentality of the internet, the discord between literacy

instruction and the tools people need, and the importance of rhetorical grammar to further people's knowledge of and ability to use language effectively.

Bolter's statement that "technologies do not determine the course of culture or society, because they are not separate agents that can act on culture from the outside" (19), also applies to the relationship between technology and language: the internet itself cannot *do* anything to language. Even Twitter cannot, contrary to opinions expressed online, force a writer to employ any sort of grammar he or she does not wish to use. However, *people* using the internet can influence others' use of language. As demonstrated in the analysis above, there is a significant amount of dialogue online that deals with grammar topics. It is an interesting, relevant, and even important issue to many internet users who are concerned with construction of identity, social interaction, creation of meaning, and organization of ideas. Bloggers who write about language are engaging not only in an instructive activity, but also a persuasive situation: they want to persuade people to view language in a certain way, to use language patterns that have proven effective in specific instances. Twitter users who tag messages with #grammar can reveal a relationship with standard English that is rhetorical or prescriptive, apathetic or championing, confident or anxious, or any feeling they care to express; and this expressed relationship may in turn influence readers' attitudes toward language.

On the importance of technology literacy, Hawisher asserts that proficiency with digital tools such as word processors and the internet is absolutely necessary for the ability of an individual in our society to function socially and in the workplace (642). How, then, do we respond to Selber's assertion that "too few teachers today are prepared to organize learning environments that integrate technology meaningfully and appropriately" (1)? Clearly, there is a gap between the taught uses of language and the practical application of it. Often, it is assumed

that grammar is learned only in the classroom, and that a few simple mnemonics can transform sloppy writing into great writing. If it were as simple as that, language would not be such a frustrating subject for so many people. Many internet users claim that their formal grammar lessons have been useless, either from simplicity, brevity, or examples that do not account for common usage; it's a familiar complaint. The problem, according to rhetorical grammar theorists such as Kolln and Micchiche, is that grammar instruction is often presented as a set of fixers for errors, rather than as a complex system of controlling language structures (Micciche 716, 720). Another explanation for this complaint is that most grammar instruction ignores practical writing situations, especially those involving digital technologies, instead focusing on academic or other formal writing in a non-digital arena. If students come to believe that grammar—an annoying, restrictive thing—matters only in these formal writing situations, then they fail to learn how the accepted patterns of language can be useful for clarity and persuasion.

Many Twitter users seemed to buy into the same fallacy, urging readers to stop making mistakes. However, the blogs discussed above presented concepts that are more helpful to language users because they give reasons for using certain patterns. Blog posts were also found to be more likely than tweets to treat readers with respect; while tweets sometimes looked like unsolicited advice or even attacks, blog posts more often resembled help articles or informal discussions. Part of the difference in tone may be explained by the character limit of tweets, but it also demonstrates a lack of rhetorical awareness even among Twitter users who are self-described as concerned with language forms. Because of the difference in styles and approaches between blogs and Twitter, these two media outlets complemented each other well

Hawisher goes further by saying that teachers fail to identify and build on the multiple literacies—that is, technology literacy in addition to linguistic literacy—of their students, and in

doing so, lose the opportunity to tap into their students' needs and interests (676). Barton and Selfe, too, discuss the connection between technology and schooling, and the trend of trying to improve the quality of education by blindly raising the budget for hardware and software in public schools. To anyone who understands computers, it is immediately apparent that the computer itself—once again, merely an instrument—does not *do* anything to educate a student. As demonstrated by this study, the mere fact of using digital technology does not automatically make a person more informed or skilled; if this were true, Twitter users would be envied as the best and brightest writers.

With a rhetorical view of grammar, we would be able to see that the internet is not necessarily detrimental to language, and that in fact, we can use the internet as a tool to learn collaboratively and practice patterns of effective communication. Now, as online communication nears the ease of speech, linguistic prescriptivism should be considered outdated and restrictive: it creates unneeded anxiety about formal perfection when language users' primary concern should be message clarity and reception. For good written communication to take place, the internet-using public should pay attention to the context, audience, and purpose of each writing situation. Rhetorical grammar addresses these needs. People already use the internet as a tool for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. With so much communication taking place through digital technologies, it is only appropriate that these same technologies should be used to better people's proficiency in communication techniques. Although the percentage of internet users who regularly engage in online dialogue about language topics is probably quite small, the dialogue does exist, and it should be fostered by those who would teach people a rhetorical approach to grammar.

Conclusion

Instead of demonizing those who are causing the supposed ruin of the language, perhaps we should be asking different questions. What do internet users want to gain from online interactions? How can we teach people better methods of clear, effective, persuasive writing? Shouldn't the use of language be informed and guided, not drilled and policed?

Important things to remember:

- Rhetorical grammar is good
- The internet is not bad
- It's okay if people do not use Standard English Grammar 100% of the time—they can communicate without it
- People sometimes worry unnecessarily about prescriptive language use, when what they should be concerned with is the effectiveness of situated communication
- Since much internet communication is near the ease of speech, people's writing often resembles their speech: although perhaps flawed, it is directed at a specific audience and intended for a particular purpose
- So, it makes sense that rhetorical grammar, which addresses needs such as audience and purpose awareness, effectiveness of message, persuasion, etc., would be greatly helpful to an internet-using public

In the words of Martha Kolln, "Rhetorical grammar will reveal what language can and will do" (3).

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